

# THE STATE AND REVOLUTION

THE MARXIST THEORY OF THE STATE  
& THE TASKS OF THE PROLETARIAT IN THE REVOLUTION

## Communist University Course No. 16

### *Lenin's "The State and Revolution"*



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## The April Theses

Lenin's 1917 work "The State and Revolution" has six chapters. We will use chapters 1, 2 and 3. As a warm-up we will use Lenin's "April Theses", and for further reading we will hand out Chapter 5 at the end.

The year of 1917 in Russia was a year of two revolutions. Another revolution had gone before, in 1905, causing the formation of the parliament (the Duma) and organs of popular power, the Soviets. Both Duma and Soviets still existed in 1917.

The "Great War", or "First World War", of 1914-1918 was still going on, involving tens of millions of armed men in unprecedented slaughter. It was an inter-Imperialist war. Russia was fighting Germany. The Bolsheviks (under Lenin's leadership from exile in Switzerland) had refused to take part in this inter-Imperialist war in any way, and instead denounced it and opposed it.

The February 1917 revolution established something resembling a bourgeois-democratic republic, based on the Duma. Lenin returned to Russia from Switzerland by train in April, two months later. All kinds of questions remained to be resolved. The question of war and peace was the most urgent. The nature of the revolution was still to be decided. Lenin pronounced the "April Theses", and later wrote "The State and Revolution" in July. We will begin with the first of these two.

The [April Theses](#) is a classic document, not because it is polished (it is rough), but because of its impact at a moment of history. It was given by Lenin verbally. The written version (download linked below) was prepared very shortly afterwards.

Lenin arrived in Petrograd (also called St Petersburg and Leningrad) barely a month after the February, 1917 revolution which had overthrown the Tsar and installed a bourgeois republican government. This bourgeois government had the intention of continuing the disastrous intra-Imperialist war in which Russia was involved. At the same time, faraway South Africa was also involved in it.

It was among those South Africans who opposed the 1914-18 Imperialist war that the need for our communist party was first seriously raised. The Communist Party of South Africa was formed by admission to the Communist International in 1921. That Communist International ("A new *International*.") had been called for by Lenin in this document, the April Theses, in **Thesis 10**:

*"We must take the initiative in creating a revolutionary International, an International against the social-chauvinists and against the 'Centre',"* it says. The Third International (also called Communist International or Comintern) was duly established in 1919.

The “social-chauvinists” of different individual countries (e.g. Germany, Britain, France and Italy as well as Russia) had supported the Imperialist war against each other, while the Russian Bolsheviks and the German Spartacists had opposed the war and had supported proletarian internationalism. The term “revolutionary defencism” was a code for the further continuation of the Russian war policy, which Lenin clearly opposes in **Thesis 1**.

The “April Theses” are short and do not therefore need a long introduction, but one can usefully highlight the following:

**Thesis 2** says: *“The specific feature of the present situation in Russia is that the country is passing from the first stage of the revolution — which, owing to the insufficient class-consciousness and organisation of the proletariat, placed power in the hands of the bourgeoisie — ...*

*“This peculiar situation demands of us an ability to adapt ourselves to the special conditions of Party work among unprecedentedly large masses of proletarians who have just awakened to political life.”*

There are echoes of this situation in South Africa today.

**Thesis 4** says: *“As long as we are in the minority we carry on the work of criticising and exposing errors and at the same time we preach the necessity of transferring the entire state power to the Soviets of Workers' Deputies, so that the people may overcome their mistakes by experience.”* This led to the slogan **“All Power to the Soviets”**, and **Thesis 5** then says *“to return to a parliamentary republic from the Soviets of Workers' Deputies would be a retrograde step.”*

**Thesis 8** says: *“It is not our immediate task to “introduce” socialism, but only to bring social production and the distribution of products at once under the control of the Soviets of Workers' Deputies.”* In other words, the bourgeois dictatorship was to be replaced at once by a dictatorship over the bourgeoisie.

**Thesis 9** proposes to change the Party’s name from “Social Democrat” (RSDLP) to “Communist Party.”

So much of this did come to pass, as we know, that it is difficult to imagine that Lenin’s support for these demands, among the leadership and even among the strictly Bolshevik leadership, was small.

But Lenin knew how the base of the Party was constructed and how it was reproducing itself. Hence he was able to be bold. He knew that the Bolshevik cadre force as a whole, and potentially the entire working masses of Russia, were behind his proposals, or soon would be. And so it came to pass.

## Chapter 1

# Class Society and the State

V I Lenin wrote "The State and Revolution" between the February 1917 bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia, and the October 1917 proletarian revolution.

SACP Deputy General Secretary Jeremy Cronin once remarked that South Africa is in some ways stuck "between February and October", meaning to compare our SA situation during the 17 years since 1994 with the eight months in 1917 between the two Russian revolutions.

This is one reason why it is worthwhile to run all six chapters of "The State and Revolution" as a course, set or series of the Communist University, if possible. In length, they are well suited to the purpose. It is more than likely that this kind of treatment, and this way of collective study, was exactly what Lenin had in mind when he wrote the work. He referred to it as a "pamphlet", which would tend to mean a text for mass agitational propaganda.

The urgency of Lenin's revolutionary purpose is apparent from the first paragraph, as is the priority that he gives to the understanding of The State as a product of, and integral to, the exploitative class-divided social system that the Bolsheviks were determined to overthrow.

Hence the first words are a definition and a challenge to those who would think otherwise: *"The State: a Product of the Irreconcilability of Class Antagonisms"*

In the first paragraph Lenin refers to the embracing of "Marxism" by the respectable bourgeoisie, and their pleasure at the amenability of *"the labour unions which are so splendidly organized for the purpose of waging a predatory war!"*

The great 1914-1918 war that was raging at the time was more than an incidental background to the Russian Revolutions of 1917. Like the lethal global neo-liberalism of recent times, the "First World War" (the Imperialist war) had seduced the major part of the social-democratic organisations that claimed to represent the working class. The structures of the working class had turned against the working class, and the crux of the matter, then as now, was The State. Lenin is unequivocal:

*"The state is a product and a manifestation of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms. The state arises where, when and insofar as class antagonism*

*objectively cannot be reconciled. And, conversely, the existence of the state proves that the class antagonisms are irreconcilable."*

Lenin proceeds to write that the overthrow of the bourgeois state has to be direct and forcible, whereas the withering-away of the proletarian state can only be the indirect consequence of the progressive disappearance of class antagonism during the transitional period called socialism.

"The State and Revolution" goes to the heart of the revolutionary theory of class struggle, sharpens all contradictions, and draws clear lessons that are still relevant today, especially for South Africa.

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## **Chapter 2**

# **Eighteen-Forty-Eight**



**Paris, February 1848**

Lenin spends the first five of the six chapters of "The State and Revolution" tracing the development of the thought of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. In Chapter 2, he sweeps through their accounts of the period of bourgeois revolutions in mid-nineteenth-century Europe that started in 1848.

Marx and Engels had good timing. Engels had witnessed Manchester in the early 1840s in the full bloom of its emergence as the first great industrial-capitalist city of the world. He had also, with Marx, engaged in literary disputes with the Young

Hegelians in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany, and other disputes with the anarchists of the time. They had also corresponded with the Chartists. They had spent time organising the working class in Paris and in Brussels.



**Berlin, March 1848**

Then they found themselves on the crest of the extraordinary revolutionary wave of 1848, and so they were well-positioned to record it and to learn its lessons, just as they were with later crucial episodes, notably the Paris Commune of 1871.

In the first line of Chapter 2 Lenin describes “The Poverty of Philosophy” (together with the Communist Manifesto), written in 1847 when Marx was still in his twenties, as “the first mature works of Marxism.” The book was written as a polemic against one, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. of several anarchists that Marx had to contend with. These anarchists tested and tempered Marx’s and Engels’ resolve, in hard debate.

Lenin moves on to the Communist Manifesto, where he immediately derives the term “dictatorship of the proletariat” from the equally direct words of the Marx and Engels in the Manifesto, namely: *“the state, i.e. the proletariat organised as the ruling class”*.

*“The state is a special organization of force: it is an organization of violence for the suppression of some class.”*

The proletariat will use the state to suppress the bourgeois class.





**Chartist rally, Kennington, London, 1848**

Lenin then turns on the reformists. Later, in Chapter 3, Lenin calls the anarchists and the petty-bourgeois opportunists “twin brothers”.

Here in Chapter 2 he writes:

*“The petty-bourgeois democrats, those sham socialists who replaced the class struggle by dreams of class harmony, even pictured the socialist transformation in a dreamy fashion — not as the overthrow of the rule of the exploiting class, but as the peaceful submission of the minority to the majority which has become aware of its aims. This petty-bourgeois utopia, which is inseparable from the idea of the state being above classes, led in practice to the betrayal of the interests of the working classes.”*

The chapter proceeds to touch “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”. It returns to Marx on the dictatorship of the proletariat, this time in those very terms, in a letter written in 1852; and Lenin says: *“Only he is a Marxist who extends the recognition of the class struggle to the recognition of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”*

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## The Paris Commune, 1871



Paris, March 18, 1871

The main text (attached) is the third part of Lenin's "Generic Course" on The State and Revolution. It is devoted to the Paris Commune [pictured in the photograph, above, and memorialised in Soviet artwork, below] and to the lessons that Karl Marx in particular drew from that experience.

Marx's work "[The Civil War in France](#)" was written during, and immediately after, the events of early 1871 in Paris. Lenin's summary of Marx, as usual, is brief but misses very little. Lenin's summary itself has its highlights and these are what we will note here.

The first is where Lenin notes that Marx would have made a correction to the [Communist Manifesto](#) of 1848 on the basis of the experience of the Paris Commune. In 1871 Marx wrote: *"...the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes"* - by which he meant that proletariat had to *"to smash the bureaucratic-military machine"* and to replace it with a state that is *"the proletariat organized as the ruling class"* and as an *"armed people"* that had disbanded the bourgeoisie's *"special bodies of armed men"*.

Lenin wrote: *"Marx did not indulge in utopias; he expected the experience of the mass movement to provide the reply to the question as to the specific forms this organisation of the proletariat as the ruling class would assume and as to the exact*



*manner in which this organisation would be combined with the most complete, most consistent 'winning of the battle of democracy.'"*

The Commune was *"a practical step that was more important than hundreds of programmes and arguments."*

Lenin proceeds in the second and third sections of this chapter to relate how the practical steps were executed.

In the fourth part, Lenin addresses the question of centralism and clearly shows that centralism is not imposed but must be won politically, as a matter of free-willing action. All the time, Lenin is carrying on a secondary argument against the "opportunists" and the "anarchists, whom he says are "twin brothers." Lenin writes:

*"The anarchists dismissed the question of political forms altogether. The opportunists of present-day Social-Democracy accepted the bourgeois political forms of the parliamentary democratic state as the limit which should not be overstepped; they battered their foreheads praying before this 'model', and denounced as anarchism every desire to break these forms."*

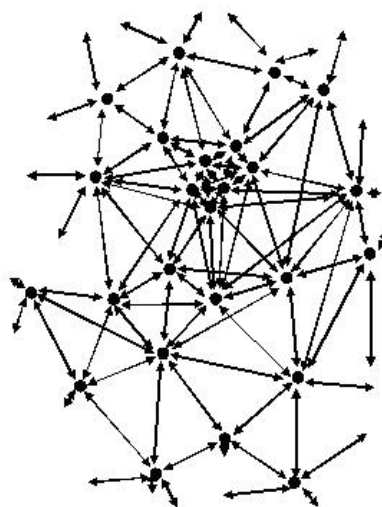
*"...now one has to engage in excavations, as it were, in order to bring undistorted Marxism to the knowledge of the mass of the people,"* says Lenin.

As it was in 1917, so it remains in 2013: One has to engage in excavations.

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## **Chapter 5**

# **Living without a State**



*"We are not utopians, and do not in the least deny the possibility and inevitability of excesses on the part of individual persons, or the need to stop such excesses. In the first place, however, no special machine, no special apparatus of suppression, is needed for this: this will be done by **the armed people** themselves"*

In "[The State and Revolution](#)", and especially in Chapter 5 of the work (attached, and downloadable via the link below), Lenin treats the question of the demise of the bourgeois state, and of the demise of state in general, as a practical matter of immediate concern. The state is to be replaced by "*the simple organization of the armed people*" and the Russian **Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies** that already existed at the time of his writing the book, just before the October Revolution, were examples of such simple organization, wrote Lenin.

This simple kind of organisation is what we in South Africa today would call **organs of people's power**. There is a lot in this chapter that bears upon the question of how to make the revolution permanent, using such principles. The best way to handle it seems to be to quote quite a lot of it, and then to make a few remarks at the end. So here goes (quotations are in italics):

*... in capitalist society we have a democracy that is curtailed, wretched, false, a democracy only for the rich, for the minority. The dictatorship of the proletariat, the period of transition to communism, will for the first time create democracy for the people, for the majority, along with the necessary suppression of the exploiters, of the minority. Communism alone is capable of providing really complete democracy, and the more complete it is, the sooner it will become unnecessary and wither away of its own accord.*

*... under capitalism we have the state in the proper sense of the word, that is, a special machine for the suppression of one class by another, and, what is more, of the majority by the minority. Naturally, to be successful, such an undertaking as the systematic suppression of the exploited majority by the exploiting minority calls for the utmost ferocity and savagery in the matter of suppressing, it calls for seas of blood, through which mankind is actually wading its way in slavery, serfdom and wage labour.*

*[Now we can] fully appreciate the correctness of Engels' remarks mercilessly ridiculing the absurdity of combining the words "freedom" and "state". So long as the state exists there is no freedom. When there is freedom, there will be no state.*

*What is usually called socialism was termed by Marx the "first", or lower, phase of communist society. Insofar as the means of production becomes common property, the word "communism" is also applicable here, providing we do not forget that this is not complete communism. The great significance of Marx's explanations is that*

here, too, he consistently applies materialist dialectics, the theory of development, and regards communism as something which develops out of capitalism.

*Democracy means equality. The great significance of the proletariat's struggle for equality and of equality as a slogan will be clear if we correctly interpret it as meaning the abolition of classes. But democracy means only formal equality. And as soon as equality is achieved for all members of society in relation to ownership of the means of production, that is, equality of labour and wages, humanity will inevitably be confronted with the question of advancing farther, from formal equality to actual equality, i.e., to the operation of the rule "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs".*

*By what stages, by means of what practical measures humanity will proceed to this supreme aim we do not and cannot know. But it is important to realize how infinitely mendacious is the ordinary bourgeois conception of socialism as something lifeless, rigid, fixed once and for all, whereas in reality socialism will only be the beginning of a rapid, genuine, truly mass forward movement, embracing first the majority and then the whole of the population, in all spheres of public and private life.*

***Democracy is of enormous importance to the working class in its struggle against the capitalists for its emancipation. But democracy is by no means a boundary not to be overstepped; it is only one of the stages on the road from feudalism to capitalism, and from capitalism to communism.***

### **The Road to Freedom**

The following statements by Lenin from this chapter spell out the road from capitalism via socialism to communism:

*Democracy is a form of the state, it represents, on the one hand, the organized, systematic use of force against persons; but, on the other hand, it signifies the formal recognition of equality of citizens, the equal right of all to determine the structure of, and to administer, the state. This, in turn, results in the fact that, at a certain stage in the development of democracy, it first welds together the class that wages a revolutionary struggle against capitalism - the proletariat, and enables it to crush, smash to atoms, wipe off the face of the earth the bourgeois, even the republican-bourgeois, state machine, the standing army, the police and the bureaucracy and to substitute for them a more democratic state machine, but a state machine nevertheless, in the shape of armed workers who proceed to form a militia involving the entire population.*

***Accounting and control*** - that is mainly what is needed for the "smooth working", for the proper functioning, of the first phase of communist society. All citizens are

*transformed into hired employees of the state, which consists of the armed workers. All citizens become employees and workers of a single countrywide state "syndicate". All that is required is that they should work equally, do their proper share of work, and get equal pay; the accounting and control necessary for this have been simplified by capitalism to the utmost and reduced to the extraordinarily simple operations - which any literate person can perform - of supervising and recording, knowledge of the four rules of arithmetic, and issuing appropriate receipts.*

*When the majority of the people begin independently and everywhere to keep such accounts and exercise such control over the capitalists (now converted into employees) and over the intellectual gentry who preserve their capitalist habits, this control will really become universal, general, and popular; and there will be no getting away from it, there will be "nowhere to go".*

*The whole of society will have become a single office and a single factory, with equality of labour and pay.*

### **Easier said than done?**

Clearly, the kind of stateless self-organisation of the armed people envisaged above by Lenin did not happen in the remaining six years of his lifetime, and still less did it come to pass in the USSR in the years that followed. It is true that the Soviet Union was constantly under attack, but this by itself is not an explanation. If the free organisation of an armed people is a higher form of organisation, then *prima facie* it ought to be the best kind of organisation in wartime, too. The argument that says that there cannot be socialism in one country is a fallacy to this extent, in the absence of further elaboration.

The history of the Soviet Union and of the other socialist countries, including China, Vietnam, DPRK and Cuba today, can never be reduced to a formula. Yet it does seem that more work of the kind that Lenin was doing on his unfinished book, *The State and Revolution*, is needed. Such work could resemble that of our late comrade Ron Press, in his essay "[New Tools for Marxists](#)", where Ron Press showed how "Chaos Theory" validates and elaborates the theory of a society existing without a State. The image above is one of the diagrams that Ron Press used to illustrate his article. We will return to Ron Press's article in the last part of this course.

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